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POLITICAL PARTIES ON THE EVE OF HOME RULE

BY EDWARD PORRITT

THE most obvious and significant change in British politics between the first and the third bill for conceding home rule to Ireland—between the Parliamentary session of 1886 in which Gladstone introduced his first measure and the session of 1912 in which a third attempt is to be made to meet the demand of the Irish Nationalists—is the vastly altered position of the two great political parties. It is a change, sweeping in its character, which is at once apparent when the House of Commons of to-day, with its independent groups and with men of a new class in the lead, is compared with the House of Commons that rejected the home-rule bill of 1886 and thereby precipitated a realignment of parties that had been threatening since the second extension of the franchise in 1867.

From the reign of William III. to the downfall of Gladstone's third administration in 1886 there were only two political parties. Originally they were Whig and Tory; but from 1832 they had been known by their modern names of Liberal and Conservative. In these two centuries there were no organized groups independent of these parties except the group that came into existence in 1873 when Butt, Parnell's predecessor, organized the Irish Nationalists, who then as an assertion of their complete independence preempted the benches below the gangway on the opposition side of the House of Commons which they have since continuously occupied. During these two centuries when power was not in the possession of one of the two historic parties, it was, as a matter of course, in the hands of the other; and it is only since 1885 that governments have had to rely on political groups organized outside of both the Liberal and the Conservative parties.

Of the two parties that were thus alternately in control of the Government until 1886 the Liberal party was the more remarkable as regards the elements of which it was composed and also the range of social classes which it embraced. From the time it was known as the Liberal party it included (1) the Whigs, an exclusive cult into which only men of the territorial governing class and of a lineage dating back to the Revolution were admitted to full membership; (2) the Radicals, who began as unattached allies of the Whigs in the days of Pitt, when the cry of Whigs and Radicals was peace, retrenchment, and reform; (3) the Liberals—men who were more democratic in their political views and convictions than the Whigs, but not disposed to travel so quickly nor so far as the Radicals; and (4) in the last twelve years of the period the Liberal party included the Liberal Labor members, trade-union leaders of the school of Burt and Broadhurst, who in politics were the precursors of the present Independent Labor party in the House of Commons.

Whips summoning members of the House of Commons to a division are as old as the reign of Charles II. As a Parliamentary institution they are older than government by party and government by cabinet. Government whips have been issued from the Treasury since government by cabinet became well established, from what for a century or more was approximately known as the office of the patronage secretary. But never since whips were first issued from the Treasury did they go to men of a political party more composite in its constitution, more diverse in their political convictions and aims, or more widely separated in social rank than during the lifetime of the Liberal government that preceded the general election which made the first home-rule bill inevitable.

At one extreme, at the older end about which the Liberal party had been grouped since the days of Fox and Grey and the long agitation for the first reform bill, were the Whigs. In this House of Commons their foremost representative was the Marquis of Hartington, who later, as Duke of Devonshire, was the owner of vast estates in half a dozen English counties and in Ireland—a great seigneur, with six or seven territorial mansions, where he was often the host of royalty. At the other extreme—the newer end—were the Labor members, living on salaries of £250 to £300

paid them by their unions, not long from the mine or the work-bench, and voicing in the House of Commons the convictions and aspirations of organized industrial democracy that twenty years later was to assert itself much more widely and aggressively and to create a party of its own at Westminster and in the constituencies.

The remarkable composition of the Liberal party in the Parliament of 1880-1885, with one exception the last Parliament in which the Liberals were to be in power without the support of independent groups, did not go unnoticed by the opposition of the day. Stafford Northcote, afterward Earl of Iddesleigh, who was then of the House of Commons, commented upon it in his diary; and as early as April, 1880, before the second Gladstone administration was fully organized, he was hopeful that a Conservative cave might be formed among the Liberals, with Goschen as its center, and that the Conservatives might soon join hands with these bolters and ultimately bring some of them into a Conservative administration.

Salisbury, who was pre-eminently the most outspoken of Conservative leaders, gave public utterance to sentiments akin to those that Northcote confided to his diary. A few of the Whigs of the House of Lords did break away from Gladstone over his Irish land legislation of 1881—legislation which the Conservatives have since carried infinitely further than Gladstone's act of thirty years ago—with Argyll and Lansdowne, now leader of the Conservatives in the House of Lords, as the leaders of the recession. But there was in this Parliament—one of the most trying of Parliaments for the old Liberal party—no such bolt by Goschen and other Liberals as Northcote had forecast; and it was 1884 before Salisbury predicted in public the break-up of the Liberal party that was to come in 1886. Salisbury then pointed to the heterogeneous elements of which the party led by Gladstone was composed and declared that it was then held together rather by the dexterity of its leader than by harmony of opinion and aims.

The Whigs had long been impatient of the conditions within the Liberal party that Northcote and Salisbury described. The Radicals for at least twenty years had been equally impatient at the domination of the Liberal party by the Whigs, between whom and the Conservatives the Radicals refused to see any difference when questions af-

fecting the Established Church, the land system, the feudal and political privileges of the territorial aristocracy, and the extension of the Parliamentary franchise and of local self-government were at issue. But the Whigs were in possession. It was not possible between 1832 and 1886 for the Radicals to supplant them, for the moderate Liberals—financiers among whom Goschen was typical and lawyers like James and Selborne—who were not of the territorial governing class and not of the Whig cult leaned much more to the Whigs than to the Radicals, and would have tolerated no movement by the Radicals antagonistic to the Whigs. The Whigs had regulated the pace of the Liberal party since 1830, whether the Liberals were in or out of power; and when the Liberals were in power six-sevenths of the offices in the cabinet and ministry and much other less exalted patronage of the government went, as a matter of course, unchallenged, to the Whigs and their nominees.

The power of the Whigs over the Liberal party accrued to them from obvious reasons. The Whigs were first in the field. They were there before there was any Liberal party. They were the progressive and reforming party from 1793 to 1832. They carried the first reform act, when the Whig borough-owners showed some disinterestedness and self-denial; and there was, moreover, a persistent tradition that survived more than half-way through the nineteenth century that since the Revolution of 1688, and more particularly during the reactionary era of the French Revolution and the English wars with France, the Whigs had been the guardians of the rights of the common people.

In the first period of popular political agitation—in the troubled and dreary half-century that preceded the reform act—the Whigs had led in some of these popular movements, always with caution and circumspection and with due regard to the dignity of their order—a dignity that demanded that they should not come into too close touch with the Radicals and the Radical organizations. None the less the Whigs had led in these early Liberal movements; and by this lead between 1793 and 1832, and the prestige and traditions of rule that attached to them, the Whigs had secured the hold on the Liberal party that was easily theirs until the third extension of the franchise in 1884 and the immediate break-up of the Liberal party that followed.

With the exception of Lord John Russell, no Whig gave

a lead to popular liberal movements from 1832 to 1885. The mission of the Whigs during these years, when they had to rely on Radical and Liberal support in the House of Commons and the constituencies, was not to lead in any progressive movement. It was their function to hold the cabinet offices and to apply the brake when the Liberal party was in power and its supporters in the constituencies were looking to a Liberal government for legislation in accordance with Radical principles. Hartington, in reviewing in 1882 the mission of the Whigs since 1832, admitted to a Liberal and Radical audience of his Parliamentary constituents in the industrial division of Northeast Lancashire that since 1832 the Whigs had never been leaders in reform. "The part of the Whigs," and he claimed credit for it in his speech to the electors to whom he owed his seat in the House of Commons, "had been to accept reform in time, and then by their influence to moderate it and prevent it being too violent and too abrupt."

By 1882 this was also largely the mission of the Conservative party, for the Conservatives ten years earlier had abandoned the attitude of their more Tory days of unbending opposition to all reform. They were now actuated by the opportunism that marked their extension of the Parliamentary franchise in 1867 and disposed to act on the principle that Lord Derby enunciated in 1871 when the bill for the abolition of the purchase of commissions in the army—a reforming measure of a Liberal government—was before the House of Lords. The bill was rejected by the Lords, but Derby refused to have any part in its rejection because he held that no institution was tenable in England which could not be defended by arguments intelligible to the mass of the electors.

Since Gladstone's first administration—1868-1874—the territorial members of the Whig party, who included about all of the old Whig cult, had been linking themselves more closely with the territorial class of the Conservative party. Their interests were the same. They had the same political privileges to safeguard; and it was obvious in the Parliament of 1880-1885, the last in which Gladstone was maintained in power by Liberals alone, that there must soon be a merging of the two groups that were working to the same end in English politics.

The home-rule bill precipitated the movement of the

Whigs to the Conservatives. Hitherto only stragglers from the Whigs had gone over. The first home-rule bill afforded an opportunity for the Whigs as a battalion to join the Conservatives. They did not go alone. Moderate Liberals went with them and also a group of Radicals led by Chamberlain, who, curiously enough, in the previous ten years had disturbed and antagonized the Whigs even more than Bright had done; more than any Radical who had been of the Liberal party since it had been known by that name. With this movement of the Whigs to the Conservatives there was ended a connection between the Whigs and the Radicals that had never been harmonious, but which by force of circumstances had been continuous since the last decade of the eighteenth century, when Fox and Grey were leaders of the long and weary and often baffled movements for religious equality and Parliamentary reform.

As the Liberal party had one remarkable characteristic through its history up to this time—its inclusion of men of such divergent views as the Whigs and Radicals—so for nearly a century the Conservative party was marked by a peculiar but quite explicable characteristic. Its recent history and its earlier history alike suggest that it is able to thrive and hold its own in the House of Commons for only a limited period. Then comes the time when it suffers from a poverty of leaders, when it is uncertain of its ground, when it is convinced that the country is going to ruin and cannot be retrieved, and when the party is marked by stagnation. Such periods are sufficiently long to leave an indelible mark in political history. The first was after the death of Canning in 1827, when Wellington, a great soldier but an admittedly mediocre statesman, was the only available leader, and when even that part of the restricted electorate that had long been voting Tories into the House of Commons had become much less Tory than its Parliamentary leaders and weary of an indiscriminating point-blank refusal to all demands for reform.

Peel rescued the Conservative party from this first rout and demoralization. The next period of disruption and ineffectiveness came with the repeal of the corn laws and the clinging for six years by the Conservative party to the idea that the corn laws could be re-enacted. Disraeli, who, like Peel, was not of the governing class, this time put the party on its feet again; and from 1870 onward, as

Disraeli claimed in 1873, it was in a stronger and more satisfactory position than it had been since the days of Pitt—a claim that was shown to have good foundation in 1874 when the general election gave the Conservatives a lease of power that lasted until 1880.

The party weakened again when Disraeli, now Earl of Beaconsfield, was too old to lead; and now that the memoirs and political biographies have revealed the inside history of the party, it is clear that in 1883 and 1884 it was heading toward another period of ineffectiveness and was in sore need of another Peel or Disraeli to pull it together once more. What it lacked, why it was weak in Parliament and therefore weak in the constituencies, was pointed out by Borthwick of the *Morning Post* in a letter written in 1881.

At this time, as for twenty years previously, Borthwick was doing more effective work for the Conservative party than any other journalist of the second half of the nineteenth century, with the possible exception of Greenwood, who had founded the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and, after the change of proprietors and politics of this paper in 1880, had started the *St. James's Gazette* to offset it. "The cruel weakness," Borthwick wrote, in 1881, in describing conditions within the party, "is in the Lower House men. Votes exist; but brains, inception, and power are lacking and there is a curious patience and even indifference about political matters."

As this extension of the franchise drew near, Churchill and Gorst and a few other Conservatives who chafed at the conditions Borthwick described realized that it might be turned into an opportunity for the Conservative party. Hence the vigorous but short-lived movement for a Tory democracy. The principles behind this movement—the only aggressive movement ever undertaken inside the Conservative party until the agitation for a revival of protection in 1903—was that the great object of government was the welfare of the common people; that the Crown, the Lords and the Commons, and all the institutions of the country were only defensible in so far as they administered to the benefit of the people at large; that the object of reform and legislation should be to deliver the people from the all-powerful classes to whom they were then under subjection; and that the main object of all political measures was to make the lives and homes of the people as healthy and as happy as possible.

Tory democracy was a sectional movement that had no support from Salisbury, Northcote, Hicks-Beach, and the other Conservative leaders of that day. It brought no new strength to the party—certainly none in the place in which Borthwick insisted in 1881 that it was most needed—and had there been no great division in the Liberal party over home rule in 1886 and no movement of Whigs and moderate Liberals over the Conservatives on this or some other issue nothing could have saved the Conservative party from another period of ineffectiveness similar to that which followed the disruption of 1846.

Home rule saved the Conservative party at this juncture. It infused new life into it and soon gave it a longer term of power than any it had enjoyed since the last half of the reign of George III. There was no merging in 1886. The Conservatives already had their electoral organization; and the Liberal Unionists started organizations of their own with the idea that the two groups in the Unionist party were to remain apart, supporting each other in opposition to home rule and to the Liberals whether in or out of office so long as the Liberals were committed to home rule.

The Conservative administration of 1886-1892 drew only one member from the Liberal Unionists; but it might have been wrecked had not Goschen been available in December, 1886, when Churchill unexpectedly resigned as Chancellor of the Exchequer and leader of the House of Commons. The Whigs and Liberal Unionists were not of Conservative administrations until 1895. Thenceforward until the division in the Conservative party over protection in 1903 there was within the party more Parliamentary and administrative ability and more men who could state the Unionist position on any measure from platforms in the constituencies than at any time in its history.

Hartington and Chamberlain between 1886 and 1900 repeated the successes of Peel and Disraeli in upbuilding the Conservative party. Chamberlain, like Peel in 1846, when he began his propaganda in 1903 for a return to protection, was the cause of a disruption. But until he brought this trouble on the party, and headed it once more into ineffectiveness and stagnation from which it shows as yet small signs of recovery, Chamberlain had a greater influence on the policies of the Conservatives than any other leader of the party. The county government act of 1888, a measure

as democratic as any that a Liberal government would have passed, and the workmen's compensation act of 1897, the most socialistic enactment on the statute-book until the Liberals passed the old-age pension act ten years later, are monuments to Chamberlain's influence with the Conservatives from 1886 to the outbreak of war with South Africa.

In the Parliament of 1900-1905 the Conservative majority in the House of Commons was larger than in any Parliament since 1832. Chamberlain had then either abandoned the last shred of his former liberalism or his influence was on the wane, for in this Parliament the Balfour government made church schools a charge on municipal as well as imperial taxes, gave a statutory title to the holders of liquor licenses, and was as heedless of public opinion as any Tory government of the reign of George III.

The merging of the Peelites—the free-trade Conservatives of 1846—into the Liberal party took thirteen years. The Liberal Unionists were three times as numerous as the Peelites. They were incomparably stronger in the constituencies and had organizations the like of which the Peelites never possessed. They also carried over with them so many of the Liberal newspapers as to leave the Liberal party that stood by Gladstone weaker in the press than at any time in its history. But less time was needed to absorb the Liberal-Unionists in the Conservative party than to merge the Peelites with the Whigs and Liberals. By 1896 the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists were indistinguishable in principles, policies, and aims; and certainly in the reactionary Parliament of 1900-1905 all traces of the liberalism, moderate or otherwise, that had marked the Liberal-Unionists had completely disappeared. Absorption in the Conservative party was inevitable from the first. Those of the Liberal-Unionists who went over in the lead of Chamberlain may not have contemplated absorption; but the Whigs who followed Hartington only went where they had long been expected, where they were cordially welcomed, when they were merged into the Conservative party.

The changes in the Liberal party in the quarter of a century during which it has been committed to home rule and dependent for its majority in the House of Commons on outside groups are as marked in the personnel of Liberal administrations as in the legislation for which these administrations are responsible. With the Liberal party con-

stituted as it was from 1832 to 1886, there could have been no old-age pension act, no Lloyd-George budget of 1909, certainly no act like that of 1911 restricting the power of the House of Lords, and no national insurance act like that to which British industries are now adjusting themselves. Both the groups on which the Liberal government is to-day dependent had had their influence on this legislation. The Nationalists were as insistent on restricting the veto power of the Lords as the Labor group; but old-age pensions and the national insurance act grew out of a new political era brought about by the organization of the Labor party and its command of forty votes in the House of Commons.

A comparison of Liberal administrations since 1906 with administrations when the Whigs were in control shows how great has been the change in the personnel—in the class of men from which the members of recent administrations have been drawn. Only two men not of the governing class were of the Whig administration of 1830-1834; and up to 1867 not more than nine or ten outsiders had been of Liberal administrations. Macaulay, Baines, and Gladstone were the only men of middle-class origin who had attained cabinet rank in Liberal administrations until Bright entered the cabinet in 1868. A few more positions of this rank were accorded men of the middle class after 1868, but the Whigs easily predominated in Liberal administrations until 1886. How comparatively little is left to the landed class in Liberal administrations is shown by the fact that only two members of it to-day occupy seats on the Treasury Bench in the House of Commons, while of a cabinet of twenty members only five were of the territorial aristocracy.

As a result of the realignment of parties brought about by the first home-rule bill and of the more radical tendencies of the Liberal party since that time the land-owning class is to-day more exclusively of one political party than at any time since the Revolution of 1688. The territorial power of the Conservatives is enormously stronger than it was in 1885. Yet, notwithstanding this new strength, its leader to-day—Mr. Bonar Law—the man who must be Premier in the next Conservative administration—is a retired merchant, with no closer connection with the landed aristocracy than had Disraeli when he, like the new leader, undertook the task of retrieving the fortunes of the Conservative party.

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